

Pensacola News Journal
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DROUGHT COSTING FARMERS PLENTY

Scattered showers have helped areas of Northwest Florida and South Alabama in need of rain for crops, but more rain is needed to end the drought. The drought is already extreme in our area, and the problem is moving steadily northward. Some locations are now estimating this to be the worst drought in 75 to 100 years.

Cotton is smaller than normal in many fields. It is hoped the rainfall will stimulate more vegetative growth before cotton begins to bloom. Farmers continue weed control as they wait for more rain. The rainfall was too late for the corn crop; yields will be severely reduced.

Rainfall in North Florida and South Alabama helped early stands of cotton and possibly helped grass production as well. However, the subsoil moisture is completely depleted, and the drought effects continue to make the possibility of profitable peanut and cotton crops unlikely, according to Dale Monks, Auburn University Extension crop physiologist. Peanuts are still under stress with poor stands in some fields and slow growth in others.

Rainfall over an extended time period is necessary to break the drought conditions. The drought has gotten so severe that the West Florida Research and Education Center Extension Field Day scheduled for July 18 has been canceled.

Santa Rosa County hay producers over the last 10 years produced on average about 22,000 tons per year with an average value of \$60 a ton. In 1999, they raised more than 18,700 million tons valued at over \$1.1 million.

This year about 5,500 acres are devoted to hay production in Santa Rosa County, according to the Santa Rosa County Extension Service. Dry weather has already delayed hay cutting in many places. Other areas are experiencing significantly reduced yields. Extension experts say it's unlikely that farmers will make as many cuttings on their fields as they would in normal years. They also agree that both quantity and quality will be adversely affected this year in many areas of the state.

If we use a value of \$60 dollars a ton for hay and see a 60 percent reduction in total production that would mean a combined loss of more than \$670,000 for the county's hay producers.

These estimates do not include the higher hay prices farmers will be able to demand because of the limited hay supply. It also does not include the extra costs livestock producers will incur because of

the hay shortfall. Livestock producers will have to purchase hay and other feedstuffs to feed their animals during the current drought.

In addition, because of the drought, many livestock producers will realize a lower level of production performance from their animals. That may mean lower milk production, lower weaning rates and decreased weaning weights among others.

The drought is already hitting area farmers in their wallets and may cost them plenty more before the dry weather breaks.

The recent rains help, but we are still at a tremendous deficit for rain. Depending on the location where the measurements are taken, we are at a normal year to date deficit of 18 to 27 inches.

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